

REMARKS OF

THE HONORABLE JAMES B. COMEY
DEPUTY ATTORNEY GENERAL
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE
OFFICE OF JUSTICE PROGRAMS

AT THE

CONFERENCE ON
PARTNERING TO PREVENT TRUANCY:
A NATIONAL PRIORITY

SPONSORED BY
THE OFFICE OF JUVENILE JUSTICE AND DELINQUENCY PREVENTION
AND
THE OFFICE OF SAFE AND DRUG-FREE SCHOOLS

ON

DECEMBER 6, 2004
WASHINGTON, DC

Thank you, Deborah, for your kind and gracious introduction. And thank you for your tireless efforts on behalf of many of our most vulnerable citizens – young Americans in or at risk of entering the criminal justice system.

I am pleased to speak here today with a group of people who have dedicated their careers to helping young people choose to live full and productive lives. Deborah Price and Bill Modzeleski, Bill Woodruff and Bob Flores – I thank you for your vision and partnership, which are setting the agenda for our work to prevent truancy and are behind the historic event here today. . This joint initiative of the Department of Education and Justice to hold a national conference addressing the problem of truancy came out of the Coordinating Council on Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

It is an honor to join this collaboration among two major federal departments, scores of communities, and hundreds of individuals across the country. I'm inspired by the determination that brings you together to ask:

- How can we build a foundation out of the expertise represented here today - on everything from education to law enforcement, and from business to public health?
- How can we create a strategy that addresses the ills in our society that keep children from going to school and from going on to become responsible adults?
- How can we take on the tragic reality of truancy – young people who are growing up without the involvement of their parents, young people who think crime and jail are the only options, young people who have given up on their futures?

One thing is clear: The answer to our questions must come from not one – but every one – of you here today.

Together, you are creating a movement to promote sound policies and show us the moral vision we need to keep our children from harm. I have great respect for your work. It's never been more important.

Two hundred years ago, in the early 1800s, a judge commented that the juvenile offenders passing through his court had one thing in common – he wrote that their parents (and I quote) “took no pains to make [them] attend school.” One hundred years later, in the early 1900s, criminologists noted that almost a quarter of young male offenders had a history of skipping school. By then, social scientists had labeled truancy the “kindergarten of crime.”

Today, in the early 21st century, truancy appears to have left kindergarten and to be working toward a graduate education. Skipping school has advanced to an activity called skip parties. Gangs designate school hours for recruitment and initiation events, in which the lessons are illegal and the connection between truancy and crime is clear. Last year, in Washington, DC -- not far from where we are right now, police broke up a skip party and arrested 15 juveniles and ordered seven adults to disperse. A couple of hours later, the adult organizers of the skip party were involved in a shootout that left one man dead and a Metrobus driver wounded.

Traditional law enforcement must be part of our war on truancy, but as that judge advised us two centuries ago, and any law enforcement professional will tell you today, we can't arrest our way out of the problem.

That's why I'd like to focus today on an uncommon approach to enforcement that we are taking at the U.S. Department of Justice. Our goal is to weave a cloth of accountability, commitment and partnership among courts and schools, families and communities – and we know that the strength of this fabric depends on the participation of prosecutors, judges, and police officers in activities that we traditionally haven't seen as our role.

First, let me tell you what is taking place in U.S. Attorneys Offices. As you may know, 94 U.S. Attorney's Offices across the country are charged with representing the Federal government in courts of law. When it comes to juveniles, the traditional role of prosecutors includes deciding who should be charged with crimes and who will be tried in adult criminal courts. However, in the area of truancy and other juvenile offenses, today's U.S. Attorney must do so much more, from being an advocate for justice and community values to working with schools, civic and business groups to address the causes of crime.

One of the great assets we have in stemming the tide of juvenile crime, including truancy, is the involvement of U.S. Attorneys Offices in youth courts. In youth courts, teenagers serve as judges, attorneys, and jurors on juvenile cases of their peers. Their greatest resource is peer pressure. For a quarter century, U.S. Attorneys have supported the use of youth courts for cases involving violations and misdemeanors. Sentences usually require admission of guilt,

recognition by the young offender of the harm they have caused and reparation to the victim, school or community – often through community service.

Throughout the country, U.S. Attorneys are finding that youth courts are an effective way to interrupt a young person's progression to more serious criminal behavior. And the popularity of youth courts has been growing as traditional juvenile courts are filled with violent and chronic juvenile offenders. Of the more than 950 youth courts in the United States today, 27 percent report they are accepting referrals for truancy. Last year, the National Youth Court Center convened a focus group to examine the use of youth courts in cases of truancy, and they found that youth courts are instrumental in building a support system of service providers and role models for young people. In addition, instead of waiting weeks or even months for a hearing, youth courts address truancy soon after it occurs, increasing their ability to stop truant behavior before it spins out of control.

But, don't just take my word for it. Look at what youth courts are doing, such as in Placer County, California. In Placer County, students who have overcome former difficulties with school attendance – I guess we can call them recovered truants – sit on a panel hearing truancy cases. The Peer Court panelists are trained in California truancy laws and are familiar with community resources, and they focus on identifying issues that might have contributed to non-attendance. Judgments include community service and tutoring, parenting classes for parents and mediation with teachers, taking away drivers' licenses and writing essays. Always, the defendant must meet with a Peer Court licensed counselor to develop a plan of long- and short-term goals.

Since the program began three years ago, some interesting things have been happening in Placer County:

- One: Truancy citations have declined each year, as students are held accountable for non-attendance.
- Two: Teachers who in the past embarrassed students with caustic remarks about their work and attendance have learned that their insensitivity can escalate non-attendance.
- Three: Parents enter the program angry about the inconvenience of having to come to court, but they quickly become partners in getting their children back on track.
- And, Four: Community service is connecting young offenders with positive role models and increasing their self-esteem.

The success of youth courts is being heard across the country.

- In Lewisville, Texas a teenager says (and I quote): “One way teen court helped me is that I now know everything I do has consequences and so will everything else I do later in life.”
- In Marinette, Wisconsin, a youth court respondent says (and I quote): “Our family talks more now.”
- And in New York City, a teenager says (and I quote): “If there is one thing youth court taught me most of all, it is that there is always a helping hand to guide you along the right path.”

Those voices – the words of the people we serve – are our best indicator of that success.

The Executive Office for U.S. Attorneys at the Justice Department also has become involved and is supporting truancy reduction programs developed by the Weed and Seed program, which now is part of our Community Capacity Development Office. The Weed and Seed truancy projects call on strategies they have used successfully throughout their prevention programs. For instance, in Houston, Texas, police officers conduct Knock and Talk visits to families of truant children – and refer them to additional services if needed. In their efforts to strengthen the existing system of accountability, police also are working with the local juvenile courts.

That brings me to another group of major players who are enhancing their traditional job descriptions in order to prevent and reduce truancy. Judges are becoming involved - they have developed their own alternative court processes for truants, which they call Truancy Courts. Unlike youth courts, which always are conducted in schools, truancy courts usually are in schools but also can take place in judicial settings. In school and in courts, judges enter in black robes and issue assignments in place of sentences. The truancy court assignments are not punishments. Rather, they are efforts to connect children and families to services and programs that will help them address underlying issues behind their truancy. Judges in truancy courts have the public system of wraparound services available – and they use them extensively – from social workers to school personnel.

One judge tells of a parent who was illiterate and afraid of school. The judge talked to the school and the PTA, who brought the mother into school activities. Once the mother began working in the school system, her self-esteem grew, as well as her interest in her child's attendance.

In addition to public services, truancy courts rely on a combination of parental involvement, followup visits, and encouragement. I've heard that one truancy court judge calls the program "compassionate compulsion." When one boy said he couldn't do the problems on his math test because he wasn't good at it, this judge offered words of support, told the boy, "Yes you can do it," and handed him a pencil. For the first time, the boy passed a math test.

Usually one judge in the court system takes on the truancy court cases, and the insights and interactions with this judge are central to the program's effectiveness. When a boy challenged a judge about how he knew whether an excuse of illness was legitimate, the judge answered this way: "You are going to have to look me in the eye and tell me about it. You know what I do all day? I judge whether people are telling me the truth."

There's another member of the Justice Department's team in combating truancy – our law enforcement officers. They, of course, play a key role in every truancy prevention strategy, from establishing close communication with school administrators to teaming up with prosecutors and judges. They also have developed their own initiatives to address truancy and truancy related concerns. For instance, police officers are forming Gang Intervention Partnerships, or GIPs [*pronounced gip*] The D.C. GIP meets every week – on Thursdays – to review the current climate in schools and communities. Remember those skip parties that gangs organize during

school hours? The DC GIP is working closely with Skip Party Intervention Teams, which keep track of young people involved in skip parties.

Truancy is of special concern to police in fighting gangs, because gangs lure kids who are on the street instead of in school. Gang-free school programs throughout the United States reflect law enforcement's interest in collaborating with schools – from the Miami Dade Police Department's work with the School Board and Gang Task Force in that county to the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police's participation on a team that provides training on gang awareness for schools along with education and counseling services for students.

The fact is that when we work together - when we intertwine the many talents in this room -- when police officers and teachers, prosecutors and parents, judges and mental health providers create a web of expertise that does not unravel in the schools or in the courts or in the police station -- we can turn lives around. We can weave dreams out of despair.

I am proud to be part of this unique group, which represents such diverse experiences but which comes together to achieve a common goal. As you show by your presence here, our biggest responsibility is to work together. It's the only way we will make a difference. Thank you for being here today and for the contribution that you are making for our children.

###